

Information sheet

• *Eye Tests and VDUs*

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IS THERE A PROBLEM?

More people are now using computers for work causing a marked increase in the number of people complaining of eye strain. According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) extensive research has found no evidence that visual display units (VDU's) can cause disease or permanent damage to eyes. However extended or prolonged periods of VDU work can lead to tired eyes and discomfort. As the eyes now perform more demanding tasks, it may make VDU workers more aware of an eyesight problem. It may also make those with pre-existing vision defects more aware of them if these are not corrected.

Computer vision syndrome is also a common eye condition amongst VDU users. Symptoms can range from tired eyes to blurred vision. If VDU operators do experience any of the following symptoms they could have computer vision syndrome. If they find it difficult to focus on distant objects after using a computer, have headaches, eyestrain or dry eyes they need to take extra care when using a VDU. It is also best to visit the optician for an eye test to rule out anything more serious.

Many employees are not aware of their entitlement to exercise their legal right to an eye test paid for by their employer. Some employers are also confused about who is entitled to an eye test, others try to avoid the costs of complying with the law. However, employers are legally required to ensure that all display screen equipment (DSE) users are aware of their right to ask for a free eye and eyesight test.

WHO IS A 'USER'?

The Health and Safety Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Regulations 1992 implemented an EC Directive which came in to effect January 1993 (some small changes were made in 2002). These regulations require employers to minimise the risk in VDU work by ensuring that workplaces and jobs are well designed. The regulations apply where staff habitually use VDU's as a significant part of their normal work

Regulation 1 of the DSE regulations states that a 'user' is "an employee who habitually uses [DSE] as a significant part of his [or her] normal work." A 'user' may work from home. Some 'users' will be more obvious than others. The regulations require employers to minimise the risks on VDU work by ensuring that workplaces and jobs are well designed. If most or all of the following criteria are met, the employee is a 'user':

- DSE is necessary for the job, as alternative means are not readily available;
- there is no choice over the use of DSE;
- significant training and/or specific skills in the use of the DSE are required;
- the employee normally uses DSE for continuous spells of an hour or more at a time;
- DSE is used more or less daily;
- the fast transfer of information between the employee and screen is an important requirement of the job; and

- the performance requirements of the system demand high levels of attention and concentration by the user, for example, where the consequence of error may be critical.

In practice, if a number of employees use the same DSE, or if use of the equipment is vital for the job, employers will find it easier to designate all employees who use DSE as 'users'.

Examples of 'users' given in the Guidance to the regulations include: secretaries, data input operators, community care workers, librarians, scientists, secretaries, telephone operators, and receptionists,

WHAT IS 'DISPLAY SCREEN EQUIPMENT'?

Regulation 1 defines DSE not only as visual display units (VDUs) - that is computers - but also microfiche readers and control screens.

It does not include: screens whose main use is to show television or film pictures, screens onboard a means of transport or mainly intended for public use, window typewriters with just a few lines of text, equipment with a small measurement display such as calculators or cash registers, or portable systems **unless** they are in prolonged use.

YOUR RIGHT TO AN EYE AND EYESIGHT TEST PAID FOR BY THE EMPLOYER

Regulation 5 requires employers to provide, **on request**, a free eye and eyesight test for 'users' or those who will shortly become 'users'. The employer may specify where the test is to be taken, but branches may wish to negotiate for the employer to make a reasonable payment where an individual chooses to go elsewhere. In particular, where an individual has specialist needs the optician chosen by the employer may not be able to carry out the appropriate tests. Any agreement should ensure that individuals who already have such problems are able to continue seeing their specialist at no cost to them, if they so wish.

The test should take place before the VDU work starts and at regular intervals throughout their employment. If glasses are needed for VDU work, employers must pay for these.

All eye and eyesight tests must be:

- 1) carried out by a competent person, either a doctor with ophthalmic qualifications or an optician;
- 2) carried out as soon as practicable after being requested where the employee is already a 'user', and where not already a 'user' before the employee becomes a 'user'; and
- 3) without cost to the employee.

'Users' should be provided with tests at regular intervals, but cannot be compelled to take one. The optician or doctor will be able to advise how frequently these tests should be. It may vary between individuals.

Employers must also provide, on request, tests for users who experience visual difficulties, which may reasonably be considered to be related to DSE work, for example headaches, eyestrain, or difficulty in focusing.

Regulation 7 require employers to ensure that all DSE 'users' are aware of their right to ask for a free eye test. But remember that employees **must** request eye and eyesight tests. There is no requirement for employers to provide them automatically. UNISON believes that employers should allow paid time off to attend these tests during working hours.

Vision Screening Tests

Vision screening tests such as 'keystone' tests are not full eyesight tests. Whilst they identify individuals with defective vision who require a full sight test, they do not screen for eye defects, such as injury or disease which have not yet begun to affect vision. They do not fulfil the requirements of the DSE regulations, and 'users' who request a full test must be given one.

THE COST OF GLASSES

The regulations state that if the sight test shows that you need special corrective lenses specifically for working with a display screen the employer is obliged to pay for them. However UNISON branches have in some cases been successful in arguing that employers make a contribution where corrective lenses are required for DSE work, even if such lenses are required for other work related activities. Branches should try to ensure however, that the employers contribution is sufficient and meets reasonable cost.

REST BREAKS

Taking regular breaks away from DSE work is also important for relaxing the eyes. Regulation 4 requires employers to plan the activities of 'users' so that their DSE work is periodically interrupted by breaks or changes of activity. The more intensive the work, the more frequently breaks are required. Where possible, 'users' should be allowed to take breaks when they need them. Where this is not possible, or unlikely due to pressure of work, an agreement on DSE work breaks should be drawn up.

The Guidance to the Regulations says that breaks should be taken before the onset of fatigue, not in order to recuperate, and when performance is at a maximum. Taking breaks should not mean that the same amount of work needs to be done in less time. Short frequent breaks are preferable to longer occasional breaks, and if possible they should be taken away from the screen.

Studies seem to suggest that changes of work activity, rather than formal rest breaks are more effective in relieving eye strain. Of course, this fact should have no detrimental affect on formal tea breaks.

OTHER DUTIES

Employers are also legally required to assess and reduce the risks of DSE work, ensure that workstations meet minimum requirements, and provide training and information. These duties are not covered in this Information Sheet but details can be found in UNISON's guide to the health and safety 6 pack (stock no. 1660)

WHAT SHOULD THE BRANCH DO?

Make sure that all DSE 'users' know about their legal right to eye and eyesight tests.

Request a schedule of those members that are tested from the employer and ensure that all members who should be included are on that list.

Use the law to insist on eye and eye sight tests, and to press employers for spectacles for all VDU 'users' whenever this is necessary, and to take a common sense approach by providing the same entitlements to all employees who use VDUs, not just 'users'.

Ensure that members are provided with training and information on how to use their VDU equipment and workstation safely. (See "Are You Sitting Comfortably" a UNISON Display Screen Equipment Guide for members and staff – stock number 2692).

UNISON believes as best practice that anyone working with DSE (not just regular 'users') should have:

- regular eye tests by qualified opticians, which are
- paid for by their employer,
- paid time off to attend eye test during working hours
- time off with pay to collect prescription/glasses
- to take part in DSE risk assessments

If a test shows the need for glasses, then UNISON believes it is best practice that the employer meet reasonable costs. Good employers will provide for this, whether they have to or not; and branches may wish to negotiate for this.